

2
ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A-2

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One Tunnel Finally Ends

The surrender of retired general William C. Westmoreland in what has been called "the libel case of the century" has made the news media joyful and has lifted a black cloud that sat on their heads for the last four months. But nobody could be happier at the outcome than the chief witness against the Vietnam commander, a former intelligence officer, Gains B. Hawkins of West Point, Miss.

Hawkins was the principal reason that the general ran up the white flag five days before his \$120 million lawsuit was expected to go to the jury.

The earlier testimony of Hawkins' superior, retired general Joseph A. McChristian, who told of Westmoreland's rejection of a report putting enemy strength at 500,000 as "a political bombshell," had been damaging. Hawkins' testimony was devastating. Not only did he recall the gist of what he and Westmoreland said to each other at a critical briefing in May, 1967, he also told of subsequently giving an order that he considered improper to make further cuts in the troop-strength estimates.

Hawkins, 65, a dumpy, balding, former high school English teacher, who is director of a nursing home, was by far the most beguiling and compelling figure to take the stand in the long proceedings. He is one of those southerners who comes on all rambling and folksy-humorous but who turns out to have an awesome command of the English language and a firm grip on the concepts of honor and duty.

His first emotion on hearing of the cease-fire Sunday night was relief. He was facing more cross-examination by Westmoreland's attorney, Dan Burt. But Burt's failure to find a crack or contradiction in Hawkins' account led to the general's decision to negotiate a settlement. Westmoreland, in the great Vietnam tradition of self-delusion, labeled his surrender "a victory," even though he got not one dime of the money or one syllable of the apology he had demanded from CBS.

Hawkins calls the outcome "an utter defeat for Westmoreland."

But he is not self-righteous about it. "I left my integrity in the same damn place he left his honor, over there in Vietnam. I helped perpetrate a gigantic fraud."

For him the appearance in the courtroom ended an episode that had haunted him for 15 years. From 1967 until Jan. 23, 1982, when, at the urging of former Central Intelligence Agency analyst Sam Adams, he appeared on the CBS documentary "The Uncounted Enemy: A Vietnam Deception," he carried around the guilty secret of the cooked numbers, the deliberate misrepresentation that Westmoreland undertook to please his commander-in-chief, President Lyndon B. Johnson, and to keep him and the country persuaded that there was light at the end of the tunnel.

"I'm a free man at last," Hawkins said by telephone. "The monkey is off my back."

"We were in a damn swamp over there," Hawkins said. "We were up to our asses in alligators. That's something the country was entitled to know. Putting a ceiling on those figures meant we didn't know what we were up against—meant almost six more years of war, almost 20,000 more lives. The statute of limitations never runs on a fraud like that."

Hawkins has his own heroes out of the CBS ordeal. One is Adams, who has been crying in the wilderness for almost 20 years about the deception and is regarded by the intelligence establishment as a crank. Hawkins sees him as "the conscience of every intelligence officer in the service."

George Crile, the CBS producer who has been taking his lumps from the trade, also gets a medal from Hawkins. "He was the catalyst; he was the one with the damn gall to put that story out. I think the journalists who criticize him might be a little bit envious."

The Westmoreland lawsuit was a right-wing crusade. The conservative Capital Legal Foundation may have put the general up to it. Former general Daniel Graham, who is engaged in the space defense scheme called "High Frontier," encouraged him. The briefest exchange with McChristian and

Hawkins would have persuaded the zealots that the two would repeat under oath what they had said on the air.

Hawkins remembers a telephone conversation with Burt, in which "he screamed at me that CBS has accused Westmoreland of treason." Hawkins told him, "Sir, nobody has even suggested that," and referred him to a local attorney for any further conversation.

"The damn flag of the First Amendment still stands," said Hawkins, who can take much credit today for the fact that it does.